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## Gurmat and Indian Philosophy: . An Inter-Textual Interface

DR HARJEET SINGH\*

### Introduction:

Gurmat, translated literally means the thought (mat) of the masters (gurus). In common parlance it refers to the teachings, philosophy and ideology espoused by the adherents of the Sikh faith. Contained in the holy scripture of the Sikhs: Sri Guru Granth Sahib, it embodies, in essence the spiritual and mystical philosophy of Guru Nanak Dev that was later enlarged through the inclusion of the writings of subsequent Gurus and Sufi saints of the Bhakti movement. The 1430-page scripture comprises the compositions (Baani) of 6 Gurus, 15 Saints (Bhaktas), 11 Bards (Bhaats) and 4 Sikhs. It is composed in 31 meters (Raagas). The Saints included Muslims, like Sheikh Baba Farid from Multan; those from the low castes like Kabir (weaver) from Banaras, Namdev (tailor) from Maharashtra, Ravi Das (cobbler) from Banaras, Sadna (Butcher) from Sindh and Dhanna (jatt farmer) from Punjab as well as those from the high caste like Parmanand Ramanand (brahmin) from Banaras. The compositions that comprised Gurmat were essentially the response of these composers to the exploitative polity and suppressive social order prevailing at that time. Thus it is that Gurmat in addition to being a religious philosophy is also an ideology with social and political undertones that is pluralistic in terms of its content and contributors and egalitarian in terms of perspective. Within Gurmat one finds references to a number of religious groups and factions that flourished at that point of time such as Vaishnavs, Shaivas, Sakat, Buddhists, Kaprwahras, Sanyasis, Bairagis, Udaasis, Avdhoots, Kapriyas, Surayis, Haajs, Darvesh, etc. Their religious texts such as Vedas, Puranas, Smrities, Shastras, Quran, Kateb, and religious practices like *Pooja-Paath*, *Sandhya*, *Aarti*, *Maun Vart*, *Yajna*, *Aasanas*, *Vibhooti*, *Namaaz*, *Roza*, *Sunnat*, *Hajj* also find mention in Gurmat literature (Kaur 1993, p 31).

Composed in the form of poetic literature, Gurmat was not created in a philosophical vacuum. Instead it emerged out of an interface with other religious and philosophical strains contemporaneous to it as well as those that preceded it. Refusing to echo the established

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ideas of the time, Gurmat instead seeks to overcome the stagnation in Indian philosophy of the time and constructs new thoughts and value systems, which are pro-humanity. The new ideas and concepts that are enunciated in Gurmat are constructed using the process of inter-dialogue both at the conscious and the subconscious level. Using this methodology Gurmat addresses other schools of thought within Indian philosophy. One finds numerous insights and echoes of these within Gurmat literature. But the speciality of the litterateurs who produced Gurmat is that instead of adopting such insights per se they modified these to fit into the prevailing context thus increasing their relevance manifold (Singh 2006, 117). In the process it evolved as a philosophy in reaction to and representative of the religious thinking, practice and aspirations of its times. As such any study of the development of Indian philosophy would be incomplete without taking into count this representative ideology. It is in this light that the present paper seeks to understand the beginning and development of Gurmat philosophy through an understanding of other contemporary strains of Indian philosophy including Vedic philosophy, Siddha and Nath Yogi traditions, Bhakti movement and Islam with which Gurmat engaged in a dialogue; and the inter-textual relationships that were formed between these and Gurmat. The objective here is not to challenge the originality of Gurmat but rather to establish its outward looking and inclusive character. It may be mentioned that Indian Philosophy refers to all strains of philosophy that were influential on the Indian sub-continent at the time that Gurmat came into being.

### **Vedic Philosophy and Gurmat:**

The foundations of Indian philosophy are believed to lie in Vedic philosophy. Vedic philosophy includes within itself the essence of almost all schools of Indian philosophy. Vedic philosophy itself is rooted in the worship of natural powers and processes rather than the worship of God as an entity. Such natural forces that were perceived to have the ability to harm or destroy were deified. The interesting point here is that just as there is no mention of God (or the all-encompassing soul) so also the concept of 'soul' is absent in the Vedas. In fact, as opposed to the soul, in the Rig Veda one finds the mention of 'the mind' which here refers to the ability to live and breathe. Laying greater stress on human values the Vedas extol the virtues of human brotherhood, love, respect, filial love and respect for parents and respect for females by granting the latter an elevated status in society.

The Rig Veda which was composed over many centuries also responded to the ever changing socio- political and economic scenario and dwelled upon the social structure of the time which was the root of the caste system. The entity of Brahma the creator finds mention in the Rig Veda and it is held that Brahmins were formed from Brahma's face/

head, Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his torso /thighs and the Sudras from his feet. Thus it was that Brahmins occupied the prime position in Vedic society and dealt with knowledge, the Kshatriyas dealt with administration, the Vaishyes with menial tasks and Sudra remained at the bottom strata as untouchables. One of the reasons for the organisation of the society into the caste system was that during this period the economy began to produce surplus goods that freed many people from direct labour and instead led them to adopt other occupations like priesthood, trade and administration. This in a way dealt a fatal blow to community living. (Dhand 1999, p 26)

Thus in the Vedas the ultimate aim of human existence was not the attainment of the spiritual and meta-physical plane, rather these stressed on achieving happiness within human form and existence. Vedas do not teach their adherents to aim for oneness with God and such like super powers rather they place their belief in the attainment of material comforts and joys through the performance of 'Yajnas' and doing societal good.

Following the Vedas, the Upanshads emerged as another significant mile stone of Indian Philosophy. This tradition is also known as Vedanta meaning 'the end of Vedas'. Actually this proposition of the end of Vedas does not seem appropriate because while Vedic philosophy is a form of mythification of nature and its powers, Upanishad lay the foundation of religious thinking. While man during the Vedic period prays to epitomes of natural forces such as Indra (Rain), Varun (Ocean), Agni (Fire) etc. for the grant of progeny and other material comforts, under the influence of the Upanishad, man moves towards self-realisation and often giving up the material comforts eulogised during the Vedic age opts for freedom from all worldly pursuits through the performance of penance. One may so say that the principles put forward in the Upanishads had their roots in the Rig Veda and were a reaction to the Vedic philosophy.

Another significant landmark in Indian philosophy was the Bhagwad Gita an important part of the Mahabharata which dwells on the relationship between the soul, the creator and the worldly wisdom involving the concepts of knowledge, enlightenment, action, deeds and prayers (Bhakti). The Bhagwad Gita presents the Creator as the formless one as well as one having material form-Krishna. While the formless construct of the creator is referred to in the Upanishads the creator in human form is first found in Bhagwad Gita only.

Bhagwad Gita seeks to give a new perspective to the concept of soul wherein it presents soul as indestructible and the body as its attire which the soul may change from



time to time. Simultaneously Bhagwad Gita combines the earlier constructs of Bhakti (Meditation), Dharma (religion) and Karma (action). Laying stress on selfless and altruistic actions it encourages man to be action oriented rather than to aim for renunciation.

The varied streams of Indian philosophy (Vedas, Upnishads and Bhagwad Gita) manifest in themselves such philosophical constructs as nature, soul, divine soul and creator and through these leave implicit and explicit influences on the philosophical streams that followed. Their influence is also visible in Gurmat wherein using logic and reason such constructs have either been accepted (vindicated) or rejected (demolished). For instance, while Gurmat accepts the Vedic stance of universal love and brotherhood, respect for parents, harmonious social relations and a high status for women it denounces and severely criticizes the caste system and the pantheon of Gods eulogized in the Rig Veda. The intrinsic character of Vedic philosophy the hallmarks of which were Brahmanic control over the social structure, idol worship and such like observances that had degenerated into mere ritualistic practice, also are contested and prohibited in Gurmat teachings. On the other hand, instead of promoting the quest for material comforts as espoused in the Vedas, Gurmat is more in consonance with the Upnishads and holds the quest of self-realization through meditation as the ultimate goal of human existence. Hence Gurmat dwells at length on the oneness of soul and the supreme soul. Gurmat accepts the constructs of 'Guru', 'Creator', 'Heaven and Hell' and 'Enlightenment' as given in the Upanishads and thus aligns with this stream of Indian philosophy. In this context Dharmender Kumar Gupta (2000) says:

It is in consonance with the Upanishad thought the Guru Nanak Dev lays stress on the oneness of the soul and the Supreme Being (God). Both the streams dwell on the ultimate union of the soul with the supreme being. (p 35)

Similarly, Gurmat echoes the construct of the transcendental and formless supreme being as laid down in Bhagwad Gita. It also accepts constructs such as enlightenment, meditation, the law of Karma. On the other hand, the human incarnation and reincarnation of the supreme being is not accepted by Gurmat unlike as in Bhagwad Gita. Thus one observes visible commonalities as well as strains of discord between Gurmat and prior Indian philosophy with regard to the concepts of God, soul and the world (human existence).

#### **Siddha, Nath Yogi and Gurmat:**

The literal meaning of the word Siddha is the exercise of control. In this context it refers to the exercise of control over the mind and to train it to work in a particular direction. Indian philosophers and thinkers have for long considered the mind to be the nerve centre or innovator for all kinds of human flaws and short-comings that come in the way of spiritual

elevation. The control of the mind (or senses) is considered intrinsic to the attainment of the Yogic state. This thought had been adapted from Buddhism. Buddha's teachings too were aimed at rising above ritualistic practices and proposed that a person may walk the straight and righteous path only once he has learnt to control his mind. (Kasel, Singh and Lamba 2002, p 22). In fact, it was when Buddhism became an institutionalized religion and started laying greater stress on meaningless rituals and observances that it alienated itself from the folk-mind. At this juncture many Buddhist monks moved out from the Buddhist fold and began interacting in society in the form of Siddhas and provided a reformed interpretation of Buddhism. Lord Buddha equated worldly life to sorrow which emanated from worldly desires. He believed that the world (Bhava) was a home of sorrows and its inhabitants were replete with sorrow. The cause of all sorrow is desire and the only way to avoid falling prey to desire was to follow the 'middle path'. The 'middle path' is held to lead to 'Nirvana' (Salvation/Deliverance). On the other hand, Siddhas provided a new interpretation of the fundamental concepts of Buddhism namely desire, world (bhava) and Nirvana (Deliverance). While they did accept that Trishna (Desire) was the cause of Bhava (worldly sorrow). Yet for the attainment of Nirvana (salvation) they advocated the satisfaction of Trishna (desire) in moderation preferring temperance and control over total abstinence. They termed their path as the path of great attachment (Singh 2004, p 18). Laying stress on temperance of desire Siddha thought promotes spiritual realization, the need of the Guru, the supremacy of human existence and thus differs from Vedic philosophy. Another landmark contribution in the journey of Indian philosophy as it moved away from Vedic philosophy was made by the tradition of Nath Yogis. This tradition criticized ostentatious display in terms of dress and rituals, idol worship and satisfaction of carnal desires and took root as a reaction to Siddha tradition. In addition, this tradition promoted the values of equality (through the establishment of a community kitchen) and thus added a social dimension in addition to spiritual dimension in their teachings. Frequently the Siddha tradition and Nath Yogi tradition are taken as essentially the same. This however is an illusion. Critically reviewed it becomes obvious that the Siddha tradition under the influence of Buddhism, spread mostly in the central and eastern parts of India and composed literature in languages spoken in the Magadh (present day Bihar, eastern U.P., Bengal and Orissa) region where the Nath Yogi tradition leaned more towards the Shavite cult and found greater acceptance in the North-western parts of India and composed literature in poetic forms and languages prevalent in Punjab and Rajasthan. Similarly, whereas the Siddha tradition espouses satisfaction of carnal desires through control, moderation and temperance, the Yogi tradition believes in renunciation and does not approve of the satisfaction of desires of the flesh. This is the reason why Yogic philosophy strongly supports a life of renunciation and is critical of females and their lure for men.

The ideas and principles of Siddha and Nath Yogi tradition have been seen to engage with Gurmat on a thematic plane. Gurmat criticizes the ideas of mind control, tantra (voodoo), black magic practice and temperate indulgence, yet it does not shy away from adopting the conceptual terminology of the Siddha tradition. Concepts like Gurmukh (believer), Sunn (state of transcendence), **Sehaj** (tranquillity), **Niranjan** (immaculate), **Nirvana** (salvation), **Naad** (music), **Bind** (moment), **Shabd** (hymn), **Surt** (consciousness) etc. find frequent mention in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Gurmat gives importance to the human form and existence attaching to it a deeper significance. The specific contribution of Gurmat however lies in the fact that it has redefined the essence of these concepts in response to the changing context as a result of which concepts like Sunn and Niranjan which were essentially human attributes began to be used to describe the 'indescribable' and 'formless' Almighty (Singh 2004, p 23). Gurmat literature establishes a similar dialogic relationship with the Nath Yogi thought current. Concepts like meditation and transcendental music (anhadnad) have been adopted in Gurmat while traditions such as the significance of Gurus and the community kitchen (langer) have also found a place in Gurmat. On the other hand, Gurmat philosophy decries/denounces the criticism of females and asceticism and instead constructs new concepts wherein females are regarded as worthy of respect for it is through them that great men and even kings come into this world (***so kyon mandaa akhiye jit jamme raajan***) It is such new concepts which form the basis of Gurmat,

The time when Guru Nanak appeared on the social horizon of Punjab, the region was strongly influenced by followers of the Nath tradition who used the display of miraculous powers to attract followers and thus draw their sustenance. A considerable amount of Guru Nanak's compositions emerged out of debates with such Yogis. (Singh 1982, p 20)

Thus it emerges that Gurmat thought took shape through a dialogue and debate with preceeding schools of religions thought such as Nath Yogis and Siddhas and it is in no way cut off from its traditions.

#### **Bhakti Movement and Gurmat:**

The early middle ages (prior to 8th century A.D.) in Hindi literature are known less for literary compositions and more as a period of social awakening /enlightenment and aesthetic expression. This period is often termed as the period of Bhakti movement. This movement started in Southern India during the eighth century when Hinduism was combating the combined onslaught of Jainism and Buddhism while in the Malabar region Islam was in the process of putting down its roots. Like most other movements the Bhakti movement too emerged out of a particular socio-political context and as an answer to the



needs of the time. This was the time when for the attainment of one's spiritual/religious goals there were three accepted routes available namely the Karma (action oriented) path, the Yogic path and the Gyan (enlightenment) path. All three routes had achieved their zenith of development and had in the process become so institutionalized that they had alienated the common man. Brahmanism in its ritualistic form had divided people using concepts such as untouchability, impurity and the hierarchical caste system. The Yogic path involving renunciation was as it is a difficult path to follow and the path of knowledge or enlightenment often left one disillusioned (Jaggi 2001, 630). The Bhakti movement at this time took up the cause of the common man oppressed by kingly despotism and Brahmanical rituals and initiated the idea of universal brotherhood and universal good and was thus able to establish a connect with the masses. This movement presented spiritual and religious reforms as the solution to the prevailing exploitative socio-political structure. In this vein this movement questioned the symbols of the established socio-economic and political structures and presented an alternative to the brutal and despotic kingship in the form of a benign, forgiving and kind Almighty. Thus it is that the Bhakti movement in addition to being a religious movement is also accepted and seen as a socio-political reform movement that was a significant milestone in Indian history during the middle ages. The movement presented an anti-establishment ideology that replaced the established institutionalized and ritualistic meditation with the mystical path of devotion imbued with love and reverence. In fact, the Bhakti movement was replete with political undertones that underscored their socio-cultural reform agenda. It aimed to use socio-cultural and religious reforms to strike at the root of an already weakened political system that was tottering under the weight of ritualistic and exploitative Brahmanism. The movement shuns Brahminical rituals in favour of love and devotion to the Almighty (Singh 1993, p 102).

Thus the Bhakti movement like the theory of karma (action) and Gyan (enlightenment) before it, considers religion as an expression of love for the Almighty and hence an instrument to establish universal brotherhood and egalitarianism rather than as something to be achieved through the strict observance of rigid codes of conducts. Within this framework the ideology considers the world a creation of the Almighty and hence worthy of being experienced; shuns false egos; denounces caste based discrimination; believes in bowing to God's will and practising the life of a householder and aims for spiritual elevation while living in the material sphere. God, for the proponents of the Bhakti movement could either be formless or have tangible (human) form. Bhakts like Surdas, Mirabai, Tulsidas etc. believed in the Almighty incarnated in the human form and hence started the streams of 'Rama bhakti' (devotion to Lord Rama) and 'Krishna Bhakti' (devotion to Lord Krishna).

On the other hand, saints like Kabir and Ravidas believed God was formless, beyond description and omnipresent. They laid greater stress on mysticism. It is this second school of Bhakti movement that finds expression and place in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, being more in harmony with the tenets of Gurmat philosophy. Viewing the earth as a creation of God, practicing humility, shunning caste based discrimination and performing the duties of a householder have all been approved of in Gurmat. Simultaneously the concept of God in human form has strongly been criticized and denounced. The inclusion of the compositions of various saints of the Bhakti Movement like Kabir Das, Nam Dev, Ravi Das and others in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib bears testimony to the harmony and empathy that exists between Gurmat philosophy and the philosophy of the Bhakti movement. Doubtless Gurmat has meaningfully engaged with and imbibed from the Bhakti movement. In fact, some scholars regard Gurmat as a part of the philosophy espoused during the Bhakti movement.

#### **Sufism and Gurmat:**

The introduction of Islam in Punjab owing to the region's unstable polity, rich economic base and specific geographic location, preceded its introduction in the rest of India by almost two centuries. Islamic forces entered Punjab with the initial Muslim invaders including Muhammad bin Qasim (710 A.D.) and Mehmood Ghaznavi (977 A.D.-1030 A.D.). Islamic principles and philosophy are all found in the Quran. The chief concepts on which Islamic philosophy dwells include: man, God, the relationship between man and God, the place of man in the world, his rights and duties and maintaining a balance in life (Habib 2005, p 66). One of the principal tenets of Islam revolves around treating all men equally since each one seeks and obtains life and sustenance from the one and only Allah (God). Islam considers man to be an independent and self-reliant entity and dwells on human welfare and lays down ways and means of leading a successful and comfortable life. The establishment of such a spiritual and idealistic way of life in the Quran makes it a focus of religious veneration on the one hand and a guide and key to leading an idealistic human life on the other hand. The mysticism in the principles of Islam was brought to the foreground by Sufism. This stream of Islam found much in common with Gurmat philosophy. Gurmat like Sufism challenges the institutionalized dimension of Islam. Sufism is devoted to the spread of Islamic values and principles and espoused a mystical form of Islam wherein love for God, importance of the Murshid (teacher) love and pangs of separation from the beloved (God) and realization of one's finite nature are the chief constructs that Sufis dwell on. The Sufi conceptualization of god as *Wehelat-ul-wajood* (the presence of the single One in all) believes in the one single all-pervading spirit. The path to attaining spiritual bliss, according to Sufism lies in maintaining the purity of heart and spirit, detachment

from material desires, accepting the unquestioned direction of the Master and unquestioned love for God. In fact, Sufism is to Islam what the Bhakti movement is to Hinduism. It is no wonder then that concepts such as love for God, importance of Guru (teacher/mentor), the pain of separation from the true beloved (god) and the realization of destructibility of the human form all find resonance in Gurmat as do the composition of Sufi poets like Baba Sheikh Farid (1163-1266 A.D.).

### Conclusions

To summarise, Gurmat emerges as an important link in the chain of the Indian philosophical tradition. Rooted in the social, political and cultural context of its time, it engages in a dialogic relationship with numerous strains of Indian Philosophy selectively rejecting or modifying and adopting or assimilating a variety of constructs from each of these strains. From Vedic philosophy Gurmat adopted the reverence of nature but modified the construct to appreciate nature as a manifestation and handiwork of the all-pervasive omnipotent Almighty. From the Upanishads Gurmat accepted the idea of soul as well as that of the supreme soul. The construct of Karma first enunciated in the Bhagwad Gita also finds an echo in Gurmat but instead of de-linking actions from the desire for reward, as in Bhagwad Gita, Gurmat sees salvation of the soul as the ultimate aim of human life and existence. The Nath Yogis strain of Indian philosophy gave Gurmat the concept of community kitchen (langer), the significance of meditation, transcendental music and the spiritual guide (gurus). With the Siddhas Guru Nanak engaged in numerous debates and discussions providing to Gurmat a logical and pragmatic dimension open to the application of reason. Gurmat finds most in common with the Bhakti movement particularly the idea of a loving and merciful Almighty and an egalitarian and pluralistic world view characterised by universal brotherhood and freed from kingly despotism as well as Brahmanical control. Sufism espoused the concepts of pure and unquestioned love for the Supreme Being as well as a purity of mind and soul and a reverence for the spiritual mentor (murshid); all of which find an echo in Gurmat.

Simultaneously, Gurmat rejects the ritualistic practices, idol worship and pursuit of material comfort espoused in Vedic philosophy, the construct of the tangible human form of the Almighty as accepted in the Bhagwat Gita and by some saints of the Bhakti Movement, the path of complete abstinence followed by the Nath Yogis and practices of tantra, voodoo and black magic practiced by the Siddhas. The low status accorded to women under the Nath Yogi Tradition is also denounced in Gurmat as is the use of intoxicants that Sufis sometimes resorted to.

In this manner Gurmat responding to the needs of the time seeks to construct a 'Gurmukh', a person who walks the path shown by the Guru, a person who is known by three salient characteristics: meditation (**naam japna**), honest labour (**kirt karni**) and sharing with fellow humans (**vand shakhna**). Gurmat thus includes all that is pragmatic, logical and reasonable in the philosophical strains that were contemporaneous as well as those that preceded it. The unique significance of Gurmat lies in the fact that since the source of schools of thought that pre-dated and preceded Gurmat thought and literature were rooted in the oral tradition these have often been the focus of much debate regarding their origin and authenticity. Gurmat on the other hand was always maintained in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib in the form of recorded written word. Its authenticity has been secured in the process of its compilation. This contribution made by the compilers of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib has virtually made it the first authentic religious compilation of the world. □

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